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STREETBEAT

FRIENDLY FIRE ON THE UPPER WEST SIDE

BARBARA KELEMAN supported ACT UP's position, but not its style. A member of the famously liberal Upper West Side's Community Board 7, Keleman was appalled by a proposal to slap a moratorium on the placement of homeless people with AIDS into the neighborhood's commercial welfare hotels. Noting that the Upper West Side has more of these "SRO" hotels than any neighborhood in New York—and that they are the last resort for homeless PWAs, because state regulations forbids placing HIV-infected individuals in shelters—Keleman argued that closing the hotels to people with AIDS would be "just wrong." AIDS activists, who packed last week's CB7 committee meeting hoping to sway the debate on whether to kill the proposal or recommend it to the full board, layered on charges of "AIDSphobia" and "NIMBYism." But when activists applauded Keleman's statements, a pained expression would cross her face, and she'd ask them to please refrain. At one point she blurted out, "You're all such self-righteous people I can't stand it!" An activist in the audience yelled back, "We're dying!" But Keleman wasn't fazed. She replied, sardonically, "That justifies it?"

By calling ACT UP's moral bluff, this extraordinary exchange symbolizes how AIDS activists seemed to lose this battle even as they won. Their confrontational tactics—speaker after speaker assailing the committee—exposed the underlying stereotype of homeless people with AIDS as drug-abusing petty criminals, and challenged official callousness toward the suffering AIDS causes. (When Keleman asked where people with HIV would go if the Upper West Side's hotels were closed, a pro-moratorium member of the audience laughed and said under his breath, "To the cemetery.") But those same tactics undermined good will, and may have scuttled a chance to build a potentially influential coalition to fight a common enemy: City Hall.

Activists succeeded in goading the supporters of the moratorium to revise their stance. Now the measure urges the city to stop placing people with AIDS in "medically inappropriate and substandard commercial SROs" wherever they might be, a change designed to emphasize to the city that "dumping" ill people into seedy hotels with no services is inhumane and harms New York's general quality of life. The committee also voted to "welcome" housing with support services into the neighborhood. The full board will consider these proposals at its next regular meeting (February 7, 7 p.m., 120 West 106th Street).

But ACT UP's **BC Craig** and others lamented the revisions as cosmetic. Indeed, late last year Deputy Mayor **Fran Reiter** quietly capped the proportion of rooms that any Upper West Side hotel can rent to clients from the Division of AIDS Services, the city's welfare office for people with the disease, thus restricting the neighborhood total to about 400 individuals. This quota will continue, said Reiter special assistant **Craig Muraskian**, because "a strong majority" of the people DAS assigns to SRO hotels are "active drug users who do not receive or want any assistance" for their addiction. "When you concentrate active drug users," Muraskian continued, "you bring in a market for drugs and drug dealers." But legal advocates see Fair Housing discrimination, and threaten to sue.

Meanwhile, AIDS activists and CB7 regard each other as enemies, even though both are furious at the city for the same reason: inadequate services for New Yorkers struck by the epidemic. The same report that once contained the call for a moratorium also blasts the city for placing homeless PWAs "in settings where they have to share bathrooms, where no attention is given to the spread of communicable diseases in the building, where there is no space to socialize or have program activities, and where code violations are rampant." The report blames City Hall for letting a CB7-approved bid to develop full-service housing languish "in the bureaucratic pipeline for more than five years." The moratorium, explained board member **Elisabeth Martin**, was a last-ditch tactic designed to prod the city into providing adequate services for people with AIDS: "We screamed and let city agencies know we thought [housing people with the disease in SROs] was an abomination. They shrugged and went back to their desks." The moratorium, added fellow board member **Byron Burnett**, was tantamount to drawing "a line in the sand."

This strategy transforms PWAs into "pawns," argued **James M. Scutero**, an Upper West Side resident who is infected with HIV. But unless community organizations such as ACT UP and CB7 join forces, they may all remain pawns. Middle-class residents of the Upper West Side (and, presumably, other neighborhoods) are angry that short-changing welfare services erodes their quality of life: people with AIDS are angrier, of course, because a lack of services erodes the quality and quantity of their life. On their own, each group has failed to make the city improve services, and that inaction seems to be continuing. Reiter assistant Muraskian insists the city is "in the process of coming up with plans" to aid homeless people with AIDS, but refused to name a single specific proposal. —**MARK SCHOOFFS**

Editor: **Andrew Hsiao**. Research: **Paul Scott**

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